



New Member Orientation

By Bruce Feustel

State legislatures use new member orientation to help freshmen prepare for their difficult new duties.

Legislating is tough work, with little time for new members to adjust to their responsibilities. Being a state legislator means having to make hard decisions on spending, policy and constituent problems. Although a person's business or professional life and previous political experience provide a helpful start, state legislatures use new member orientation and other training to help freshmen prepare for their difficult new duties.

New member orientation is getting a make-over. Although it has been fairly common practice to orient new lawmakers to their duties, legislatures are now taking it more seriously and are modifying training based on feedback and surveys, understanding of adult learning styles and today's needs.

Planning needs to start early.

Planning. Planning for new member orientation is often a joint venture involving the House or Senate chief clerk or secretary, one or more legislative agencies and legislative leadership. States tend to find that planning needs to start early, that a variety of viewpoints are needed and that the backing of leadership for training is critical. In addition to these three traditional sources of planning, states such as Alabama, North Carolina and Texas receive help from their higher educational institutions.

Duration. Most legislatures provide a new member orientation that is in the one- to two-and-a-half-day range, finding that is the right balance between imparting key information and respecting legislators' busy schedules. However, California, Colorado and the Florida House have greatly increased the time spent on orientation, finding it valuable. They are also breaking the training into phases of two or three days so that legislators have time to think and reflect on what they've learned in a previous phase. This approach provides training in manageable "chunks," rather than overwhelming the participants with too much information at once.

Reimbursements. Legislatures most commonly provide a mileage reimbursement for new lawmakers attending orientation. More than half the states report that legislators are paid salary or a per diem. Some states provide for expenses under a voucher system, with only a handful of states using unvouchered expense reimbursements.

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Training Tools. One of the biggest changes in new member orientation concerns the way the training is provided. Traditional methods using presentations and panels are still highly popular, but states are adding mock floor and committee sessions to give new legislators some hands-on training. Presentations are often made with computers to enhance participants' understanding. States are also supplementing the training with handbooks, audiotapes and videotapes to help legislators educate themselves at their own pace and convenience. A few states are also including case studies and mock media sessions.

Faculty. States tend to rely on current legislators and staff to provide the training for new member orientation. Many states also include lobbyists, state agency officials and staff, and former legislators as part of their faculty. A few states include university faculty and outside consultants, trainers and facilitators.

Current legislators and staff often provide the training.

Substantive Issues. States vary greatly on the types of substantive policy issues they include in new member orientation. Some bodies, such as the Florida House, place a great emphasis on learning about substantive issues. States on the other end of the spectrum figure legislators will learn these issues largely through the committee process and on-the-job training. Most of the states provide some training around ethics and conflict of interest laws and policies. Many states provide overviews of their tax policy, education system, health and welfare programs, environmental policy and judiciary. An increasing number of states are also covering sexual harassment policies.

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Procedural Topics. The orientation almost always covers the bill enactment process, legislative rules (parliamentary procedure), the role of staff, the committee system and administrative details, such as expense reimbursement. States often include the budget process, media relations, constituent service, state government organization and the role of party caucuses.

Technology Issues. As legislatures become increasingly reliant upon technology, more states are making that type of training a part of orientation. Legislators typically learn how to use their laptops or other computers, what the rules are regarding legislative technology, the particulars about the legislature's Web site and how to use the e-mail system. A handful of states provide assistance in creating a legislator's personal Web page. In many states, technology issues are handled by some group orientation and training, followed by individually focused assistance and training.

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Advice. The staff and members who plan new member orientation have strong opinions about what leads to a successful program. They advise:

- Plan well ahead.
- Get leaders' support.
- Don't overwhelm the participants.
- Focus on the essentials.
- Make it hands on.
- Give participants time to get to know each other.
- Be flexible and make adjustments.
- Provide training in segments that allow time for reflection.
- Custom fit your computer training for a wide ability range.
- Give participants materials that allow them to continue learning.
- Get feedback and adjust future programs based on that information.

Selected Reference

Feustel, Bruce and Rich Jones. "Legislator Training 101." *State Legislatures*, Sept. 2001, 16-19.

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